

THE FACE OF FEAR

How long he had been running for he didn't know, but with each labored breath it seemed like a lifetime. He chanced a furtive glance over his shoulder at the beast in the distance, it had grown bigger since last he'd seen it. Growling and snorting it kept up its lumbering pace across the land. Every now and then it would rear up on its hind legs and let out a frightful roar its eyes glowing malevolently as it glared at him.

The man turned and broke into a dogtrot as the monster started after him once more. As he ran his mind traveled back down the years trying to remember where and when he had first come across this demoniacal being that hounded him so relentlessly.

As a child he could remember the cold dread with which he greeted the oncoming night, the beast had been present then, prowling around outside his window seeking a way into his dreams and visions. Dogging his every step as he walked to and from school, hiding behind lockers and in darkened crevices waiting patiently for that fateful moment when he was all alone. Fear had lent strength to his trembling legs and carried him swiftly home where he had played within sight of the house till dark, ever conscious of the impending doom hovering over his shoulder just out of sight. No one had believed him whenever he tried to tell of the mind-numbing terror lying in wait for him.

The man paused by a small cairn as he contemplated his early formative years, the beast had always been there, and as to where it had appeared from was a mystery he had never yet been able to fathom.

As he stepped back onto the well-worn path he found himself returning again for some inexplicable reason to the troubled years of adolescence. A nightmarish existence where the brute had begun taking shape, growing the hair, teeth, and fangs now that were now all too familiar. He had thought for a few fleeting years that the beast had finally given up shadowing his every move. But he had been so terribly wrong, if anything it had grown stronger with each passing day.

In the valleys of *Financial Ruin* it had been so close he could smell its stinking decaying breath. The grinding poverty had slowed him down and he had almost lost his way in the twisting turning defiles, as he tried for months on end to shake off his nemesis. Each path either led downhill to the roaring gorge below him, or into a blind cul de sac. And always above and around him he could hear the roaring of the monster as it sought out its prey, at night wherever he camped it prowled the outskirts waiting for his concentration to lapse. The brooding stony sentinels that towered over him seemed to be pressing in from all sides. The nameless terror growing bolder and bolder with each day, but he had eluded the monster and pushed on to the dark woods of *Quiet Desperation*.

He had thought he could escape the beast beneath the leafy canopy, the woods were deathly quiet and almost beckoning. At last here amongst the sheltering oaks he could find sanctuary and perhaps survive a little longer there were dozens of cabins littered throughout the forest inhabited by quiet nervous folk who were content to live out the remainder of their lives in quiet desperation. Some seemed even to be slightly sympathetic to his needs and the numbing fear that gripped him whenever night fell, but not one of them could hear let alone see the monster skulking in the woods.

It had eventually grown impatient, and seizing its chance as he strayed too far from a cabin one afternoon had hounded him mercilessly through the darkest night he could yet recall. The depression that had come upon him had very nearly destroyed him, as he sank down beside overgrown oaks with exhaustion setting in. To be lost in the timbered hillsides however was to lose your mind, he had fought his way out of the maze and not a moment too soon. The ogre had been close then, and in sheer desperation he had made his way down to a nearby seaside town.

There he had booked passage on a ship leaving the next day thinking that the awful horror would never follow him across the *Ocean of Cowardice*, but he had been wrong. The beast was an agile swimmer and as he stared astern his heart sank, for the brute could be seen paddling effortlessly towards him. Frantically he had begged the captain to set full sail at once pointing out the creature as he did so, but the shipmaster hadn't been able to see it and laughed at his fear. The vessel seemed to be going slower and slower with each passing day as it hugged the shoreline. Its glowing red eyes never left his for a moment, there was a certain cold blooded determination in its passage through the surging tides, and the man grew ever more fretful as the monster drew closer.

Eventually the captain grew tired of his pleading and had him thrown overboard to the mercy of

a bogeyman he couldn't see. The ill-fated, man had almost drowned in the raging tempestuous seas, he was powerless as the maelstrom raged around him. He felt the beast moving around beneath him and thought the end had finally come, but a billowing wave had carried him high above it and hurled him onto the shore.

It was there he had seen a glimmer of hope as the next morning he chanced upon a woman who sympathized with his misfortune, she believed his frantic story about the remorseless tyrant behind him. Together they had set out across the *Plains of Naked Exposure*. He had been grateful for the company and the two had spent many pleasant days wandering the rolling grasslands. Strangely enough the monster had hung back, as if it feared the woman but still it was there, hovering in the background.

The featureless landscape had frightened the man however as long forgotten feelings and emotions emanating from his shattered childhood had risen to the surface. Stoically he had kept it all inside himself fearful in case the fear and terror he felt should bubble over and swamp them both. He found in the end that he could not communicate fully to the woman the depth of his great fear as the nightmare closed in on them. She had become frustrated and tired of his lack of intimacy and left him helpless and alone on a lonely hostile Plain.

She deserted him at the worst possible moment as a violent storm looming on the horizon swept across the grasslands, the terrified man cowered for days in a hastily dug foxhole whilst the monster prowled around him. He had made his escape on the evening of the third day and reached the sombre shadows of *Valley of Humiliation* by the dawn's early light. To his right lay the great river of *Wasting Disease*, its banks choked with reeds and when he approached the bank a strong undertow was very much in evidence. The river flowed out to the rancid *Sea of Extinction* and once there the man knew that all was lost. He would cease to exist, no more would he be remembered by those he'd met along the way and for a fleeting moment of insanity he considered throwing himself to the mercy of the river. Only with the everlasting sleep it promised would he find release from the nightmare closing in around him.

But death was not a feasible option and in the end he turned away to the *Hills of Loneliness*. The winds howled mournfully around him as he walked, head bowed dejectedly no longer caring if the monster in the distance devoured him. The sheer emptiness of the place was more than he could bear and soon he set off again at a fast trot.

The man turned once more to stare into the distance hoping against hope that the beast had finally given up the chase, but it was still there, larger than ever. With each passing day it had grown bigger and stronger, it was now twice as big as when first he'd set eyes upon it. With a sinking heart he realized that he would never escape the nightmare that haunted his dreams and plagued his every waking hour. Again he set off as the beast on the distant horizon let out a mournful howl that set his teeth on edge and turned his stomach to jelly.

Before too long however, he had arrived at the end of the road. The *Ocean of Disaster* lay before him and as he stared down at the waves pounding the rocks below him it seemed as though all his attempts at evading the monster of his dark imaginings had been but a cruel mockery. To have come so far and to have suffered so much and now to discover that there was no way out-it was a demoralizing turn of events. There was only one way forward and that meant a gruesome death on the rocks below the only way out was back, towards the beast that had been chasing him all these years. Awash in a sea of cowardice, the man glanced back towards the approaching fiend that had hounded him so relentlessly all these years.

It was with great fear and trembling that the man turned at bay as a frightened animal in a trap, brandishing the branch of a tree that lay beside him. His throat felt dry and it seemed as though his legs were rooted to the spot, never before had he ever contemplated facing up to the one thing he feared the most. Of all these trials and tribulations he had faced over the years none was as horrifying nor as daunting as the nameless terror bearing down upon him. Swallowing his fear he walked slowly and hesitantly towards the beast thinking that perhaps some affirmative action would cower the animal into submission, but he was wrong.

The creature sensing the end was in sight merely quickened its pace, howling with all the fury of a hundred banshees. The man hesitated once or twice but his mind was set, the only way to escape the rocks at his back was to go forward into the teeth of the thing he feared the most. Perhaps fear

itself would reinforce his failing strength. He had reached the outer limits of his endurance and as the animal drew closer and closer he cast his mind over the high points of his life-only to find that they were few and far between.

The man moved slowly towards the grotesque being, holding the branch high above him the beast growled and sniffed the air cautiously. He drew to a halt before and stared deep into its eyes, calmly embracing the death he was so sure was at hand. The creature growled again and began backing away glancing over its shoulder as if it expected another of its own kind to appear from over the horizon. The man rubbed his eyes in amazement at the strange metamorphosis taking place before his eyes. The beast appeared to be changing shape growing smaller and smaller, encouraged by this he advanced upon it unsure of his next move but resolved in his own mind to see it through.

As the creature grew smaller it became less frightening and more timid, scuttling to and fro in front of him. Eventually it was so small as to be no bigger than his thumb. The man stopped beside it and bending down picked it up so as to examine the fiend that had pursued him so relentlessly all these years. His heart leapt to his throat in stunned amazement as he recognised the features staring fearfully back at him, it was then that he saw the face of fear as his own terrified face stared back at its creator.

Written by Alastair Rosie 1997 ©